

Old World
Josko Gravner (below) works his wines from vineyard (left), to amphorae (far left) to Slavonian-oak barrel (below).



Vino antico

He works by the cycles of the moon and shuns additives of any kind: meet Friulian winemaker Josko Gravner, the reluctant poster boy of the natural wine movement.

Josko Gravner is an Italian original. Revered by some, misunderstood, envied and even ridiculed by others, he's cut a courageous, solitary path through the slings and arrows of winemaking trends and chosen an individual way of producing wine. Long before the current fashion for "natural" wines took hold, Gravner had outgrown his 1980s fascination for barriques and French varietals and decided, rather controversially, to make his wines in large clay amphorae.

"This is a pre-Roman form of winemaking, the oldest model we have, and it's still prevalent in Georgia, in the Caucasus Mountains," he says as we visit the cellar below his house where vast, man-sized clay jars are buried below the floor with only their necks protruding. The fragile amphorae, which are sealed with beeswax, are hand-crafted in Georgia. Gravner's decision to abandon more modern oenological techniques in favour of this ancient method caused a furore in winemaking circles, but his results spoke for themselves, with Eric Asimov, chief wine critic of *The New York Times*, calling his 2001 wines, his first vintage from the amphorae, "more vivacious and idiosyncratic than ever."

"Using the amphorae allows the wines to be held at the earth's constant temperature in

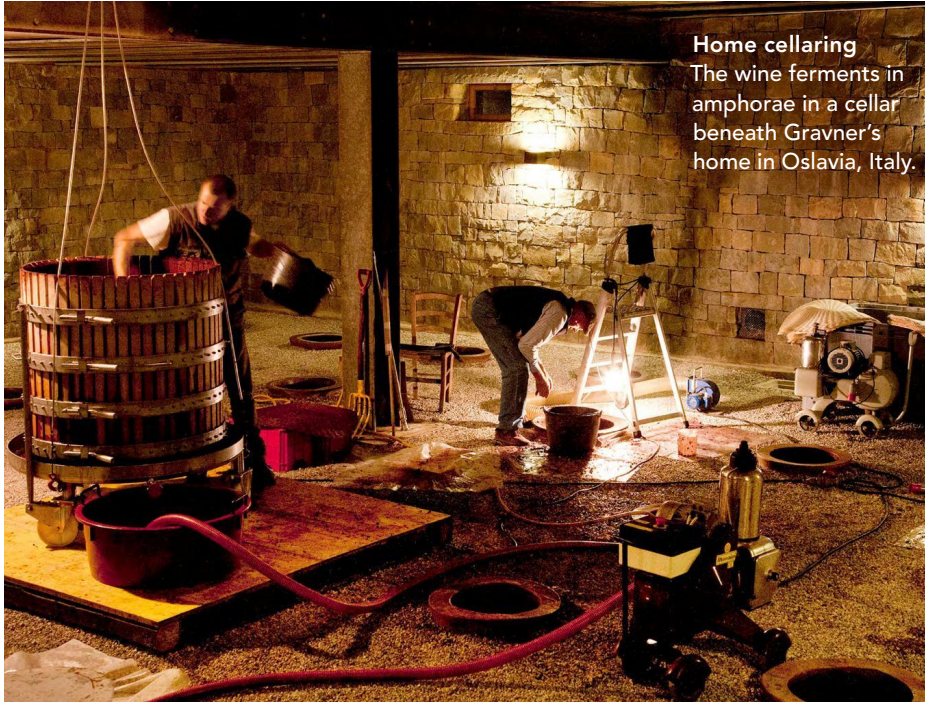
one large mass," Gravner explains. The wine is not influenced by wood, nor is it subject to the temperature vacillations of steel tanks. "In the end, I've chosen to make wines as naturally as possible," he says. "To do that I've eliminated the inessential: refrigerators, stainless-steel tanks, small barrels, filters, clarifiers... I don't even analyse the grapes in labs any more. It's enough to taste them to know when to pick." He often harvests one month later than his neighbours, when his white grapes have turned golden-brown. Gravner works by following the cycles of the moon, without using chemical pesticides, fertilisers or weedkillers in vineyards that are tended as lovingly as gardens. In the cellar, he adds the minimum of sulfites.

If this appears homey and bucolic, don't be fooled. Not only does Gravner have an exceptional and experienced palate, but his use of the amphorae and the ability to leave the grapes almost to their own devices once they are in the cellar necessitate exacting work in the vineyards. "The amphorae are like big speakers: they amplify whatever is in the wine, be it good or bad," he explains.

At harvest time, the grapes, which must be perfectly mature and healthy, are loaded

into the clay vessels and left to ferment at their own pace using native yeast cultures present in the cellar. Gravner then leaves the wine to macerate with the skins, seeds and pulp for several months in the amphorae before pressing. The jars' pointed bottoms enable natural decanting to take place and the residues to be discarded. After a further spell in the amphorae, the wines are pumped into towering barrels made of Slavonian oak. The ratio of wine to wood in these barrels is such that almost no influence from the oak is tasted in the final wine – the opposite of small barriques. Gravner's wines get no other clarification; their light cloudiness doesn't bother him. "A wine's colour is no different than the colour of our skins: it's insignificant. What matters is what's below the surface," he says. The wines are bottled unfiltered, and he often waits as long as seven years before releasing them onto the market; a time-frame that, from all accounts, seems to be working. When Will Lyons, weekly wine columnist for *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, tried Gravner's 2004 vintage, he reported, "the purity, or perhaps honesty, of these wines is what marks them out... it is hard to imagine ever tiring of drinking these wines.">

PROFILES



Home cellaring
The wine ferments in amphorae in a cellar beneath Gravner's home in Oslavia, Italy.

Gravner lives and works in one of the farthest-flung corners of Italy, the Collio hills of the north-eastern region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and his village, Oslavia, overlooks the hills of Slovenia. He owns 18 hectares of vineyards and works the vines and wines himself. He recently made another radical decision, to reduce his grape varieties to just two: ribolla gialla, the floral, native white that has been planted on the slopes of Oslavia for more than 700 years; and pignolo, a little-used

symbols of his independence. Mr Gravner is, as Eric Asimov predicted in 2005, "blazing his own trail." When asked what he feels about the growing trend for organic, biodynamic, natural and "true" wines, he replies, "All I can say is that after 44 vintages, I am now really making my own wine. It's not dictated by fashions or appellations. Those certificates are useless because the key thing for producing wine, even ahead of the grapes, is the honesty of the winemaker. And that's something no

"It's not dictated by fashions or appellations. Our credo is to respect the land and ecosystems. That's how I make my wine."

red variety that is native to Friuli. Before that, his vineyards also contained pinot grigio, sauvignon, chardonnay and riesling Italico, all varieties that had been naturalised in Italy since the time of Napoleon. He's now committed to working only what's truly local.

In the late 1980s Gravner was a catalyst for a handful of winemakers in Oslavia who were experimenting with long macerations for white wines as well as reds and adhering to earth-friendly philosophies for their viticulture. Those amber-hued whites, which were so shocking to conventional drinkers who'd been raised on classic pale or colourless white wines, helped launch the natural wine movement, which has now spread internationally as the appreciation for natural wines has grown.

Today Gravner is something of a loner, a reclusive, ascetic figure wary of the media and of other producers. His wines consistently win top ratings and have become iconic

school can teach or certify. All too often a simple passion for the earth is supplanted by a complicated passion for business. I come from a family of contadini, people who have always worked the earth. Our credo is to respect the land and its ecosystems. That's how I make my wine."

Gravner's Ribolla Anfora 2003 is a clear, soft amber colour. It has a complex bouquet of herbal notes, with hints of pine resin and eucalyptus, complemented by sweet fruit aromas of apricots and grapes; in the mouth, the vibrant fruit is joined by toasty, salted caramel and a mineral energy that unfolds into the long, dynamic finale. It's a unique and inspiring wine, just like its maker.*

Gravner wines, imported by Addley Clark Fine Wines, are available at, among other places, Quay, Bentley, Garagistes, Fratelli Paradiso, Urbane, 1889 Enoteca, E'cco and City Wine Shop. addleyclarkfinewines.com.au; gravner.it

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